

COLLIN

FORCES

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F O R C E S

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

FORCES 2007 reads as if
a generation of writers and artists has
slowly, deeply inhaled and is holding that
collective breath until uncomfortable.
Here, under express tension, is that release,
equal to the catastrophic ballooning bang
of a zeppelin unfortunate enough to roam
unassumedly across one stray spark -
we seem to be at the crossroads
and between the crosshairs."

R. Scott Yarbrough

Editor of *Forces Literary Magazine*



Snap

PAUL BELLAH



Sculpture

JUDAH NELSON



A Very Short Spring

JULIE JEWETT

The days shorten, the leaves drop
birds search for a southernmost plain

all of life constricts, contracts
compresses itself into little chambers
the ice can't touch

A warm breeze causes the few brown leaves
that are still clinging to their branches to stir
and rustle like young girls' Easter dresses

and coaxes all of the little rodents and raccoons
out of hiding, and the shy iris to unfurl and turn
its petals, like spun silk, up toward the sun

Then the winds change again
and the temperature drops; icy crystals bite
into the earth

And then you know that
all of the worst things you think about yourself
I think them, too



Sculpture
MIRTHA AERTKER

Africa

YANNICK DESIRE ASSALE

I was the first mother.
I don't use makeup; I am natural.
I am not cool in winter,
And I am also not too hot in summer.
Anyone is happy to visit me.
Oh, check over there, it is the Nile, my river.
From Kilimanjaro, right here,
I am able to see the sirens
In this water that people call ocean.
I am rich; I have energy, petroleum, food like beans.

My babies are blacks
And several were taken for slavery in my hands.
I thought they would come back, but none of them did in the end.
I have many diseases.
We are five sisters and I am ranking like the last.
In my ears, gun's sound never ceases.
Every morning, when God turns on his light,
I have a thousand and one questions to ask to the Holy God
And it started when I was one hour old.

God, why do you give me this child?
Between we five, why I am the last and will stay the last?
Why, God are my children so wild?
Why don't they work together to improve me?
I have everything to end first but why am I the last?
When God turns off his light, tired, with no responses, I sleep.
Oh God, should I be proud or sad of what you gave?
Should I cry or laugh for all the wars that I have in myself?
Should I blame someone because I am rich and poor at the same time?
Why do I look like a Gun;
With a gun, I will never be happy.

TALMEEZ F. BURNEY

My question made her laugh as she handed me a glass of cold water from a nearby cooler. This girl was *shia* Muslim. According to our stereotypes, *shia* hate *sunni*. This concept has always existed; some *sunni* believe that whenever a *shia* gives water to a *sunni*, he has spit in it. I said, "Oh, come on, Saba, just tell me the truth. How many times did you spit in this glass?" Both of us burst into laughter.

She was quick in her response: "Don't you know, now that *Kazmi* is minister, he has ordered someone to spit in the reservoir from morning to night? Don't think *shia* will ever give up on *sunni*." Her answer was quick and joyous. Laughter cemented friendship for us.

Saba wasn't my classmate; even our departments weren't the same. She was in the last year of her Master's in International Relations. The girls' common room was our chatting spot. We had only one interest in common, literature. As an avid reader, she knew the basics of Urdu *Ghazal*. She even knew the history of the progressive movement, a powerful movement led by some talented but frustrated writers who addressed fissures in our old, basic concepts.

This chubby, short girl always wore black, a symbol of the *shia* sect. According to her, "I'm the same color from the inside out." Her expressive eyes always smiled under their clear glass curtain. Another girl in Saba's department was surprised by our long discussions; according to this girl, Saba rarely spoke with anyone else.

I don't know where she is now, but for the past three months I've been missing her, not because she was my best friend, but because she was *shia*. For many years we shared something, something with no material value but which changed and shaped our lives. Despite some extreme differences and constant conflicts between our sects, we never argued, even though we disagreed frequently.

Whenever I hear any news from Iraq about the fighting between *shia* and *sunni*, I start missing Saba. I know that death is neither *shia* nor *sunni*.

This fighting in Iraq always reminds me of a fable of two strong bulls who are buddies. A lion wants to eat them, but both of them are protectors of each other. The lion sends a fox because, when power fails, strategy works. As usual, the sly fox does his best to turn them into enemies. Those stupid bulls, they didn't even know the alphabetic difference between "fox" and "foe." The fox wasn't successful with the first bull, but he didn't give up. He limited his negotiations to the second bull. Finally, the bulls became enemies. This made the lion's job easier because when he attacked the first bull, the second didn't come to protect his former friend. The second bull forgot that he would be the next victim.

I don't know why the second bull always forgets the first. I think he has amnesia.

I don't know what Saba would say about his fable, although I'm sure she knows of it because of its commonality. The fox is sly but not smart enough to succeed every time in separating the flesh from bone. I'm sure Saba would agree with me, even though sometimes she disagreed just to tease me; I can still see her hidden laugh behind her twinkling eyes.

The Golden God

TALMEEZ F. BURNEY

The reflection
of one nation's adoration
through its own complexion.

KYLE SCHEUMACK

I am patient to help, always eager to please.
I can't say what I want, so I hold my breath.
I am calm and collect, never meaning to tease.

An old man walks inside, he seems lost to me.
He walks like a turtle from right to left;
I am patient to help, always eager to please.

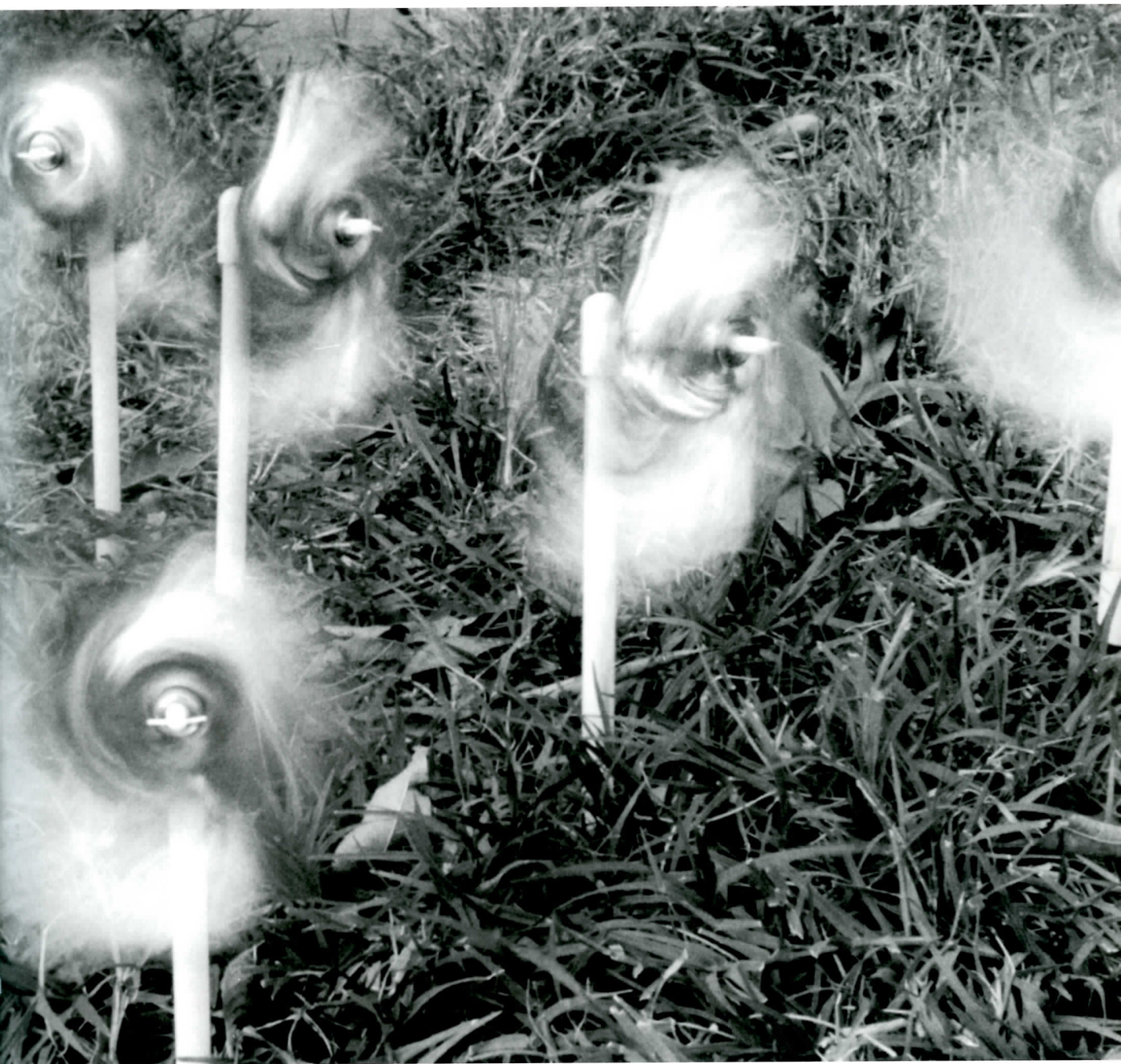
Can't help but laugh, he smells like cheese;
I say "Can I help you?" I think he's deaf.
I am calm and collect, never meaning to tease.

A lady returns 'cause she forgot her keys.
She has the power to talk you to death.
I am patient to help, always eager to please.

She makes a comment about birds and bees.
She's running errands and soliciting for sex,
I am calm and collect, never meaning to tease.

Can there be customers other than these?
Without customers, my job is perfect.
I am patient to help, always eager to please.
I am calm and collect, never meaning to tease.





Whirlygigs RAQUEL ARZVALDA

Identity Crisis

KRYSTINA FARR

The constant gossip of friendly critics creates
A new scar with a persistent attempt to heal
The internal cry of the ancient wound states
An incessant endeavor or matching the set ideal

The haunted quest for acceptances causes
An impulsive change from coy to vain
Yet the soft concealed heart pauses
As the conscience reveals past pain

An unwelcome visit from the truth inside
Will impel ourselves to choose between
The once missing person we tried to hide
And a created mask that we want seen

The question is, which identity will we choose
And which part of us are we willing to loose





Untitled CORY GRAHAM

Pink

JULIE JEWETT

Pink.

A pink skirt.

And brown. A big brown box that made a noise like
an airplane. It was the air conditioning vent outside.

The neighborhood kids and I
used to stand on top of it, and the air would rush up
all around and blow my skirt and hair up. As I grew older,
the top of it began to creak under my weight.

Sitting on top of that old vent

And the teenage boy from a couple of streets over.

Turning around to tell Jennifer that I had to go home
as I ran along the line of identical wooden fences.

The word heard for the first time,
moving around on my father's lips as he called the police.
I watched his teeth moving up and down, I imagined them
as a white clam shell opening and closing under the sea.

And I remember, after that, I wasn't allowed to play outside anymore.





Dream Catcher MIRTHA AERTKER

SUSAN BLICK

I hate
conflict
the opposition of right and wrong.
I much prefer a truce,
the monotony of calmness.
But you insist
on prodding me
for an answer that would satisfy
your
need to know.
Not necessarily my answer
because what I say is usually
a thinly veiled half-truth and
never the whole
because you have already decided
what you want me to tell you.
And while you have been poking me
with your verbal stick
I've been thinking
Gee, that kinda hurts.
But you went right on poking me.
You couldn't leave it alone
rephrasing the same question
rehashing the same tired subject
and so
I told you
what you didn't want to hear
but exactly what I wanted to say.

So now why are you crying
and making such a fuss
over what I thought
but didn't want to say.
If you didn't mean to know
the whole truth
why did you ask
and then keep
poking me with your stick.
Besides, you know
things aren't always
black and white
and you know that I
much prefer
shades of grey.



Shades REBECCA LEWIS

ALEXIS POOLE

my temperature just rose.

i'm feverish right now, despite the coolness of the day.

i just saw you walk up my stairs and
walk quickly down again as if you were scared.

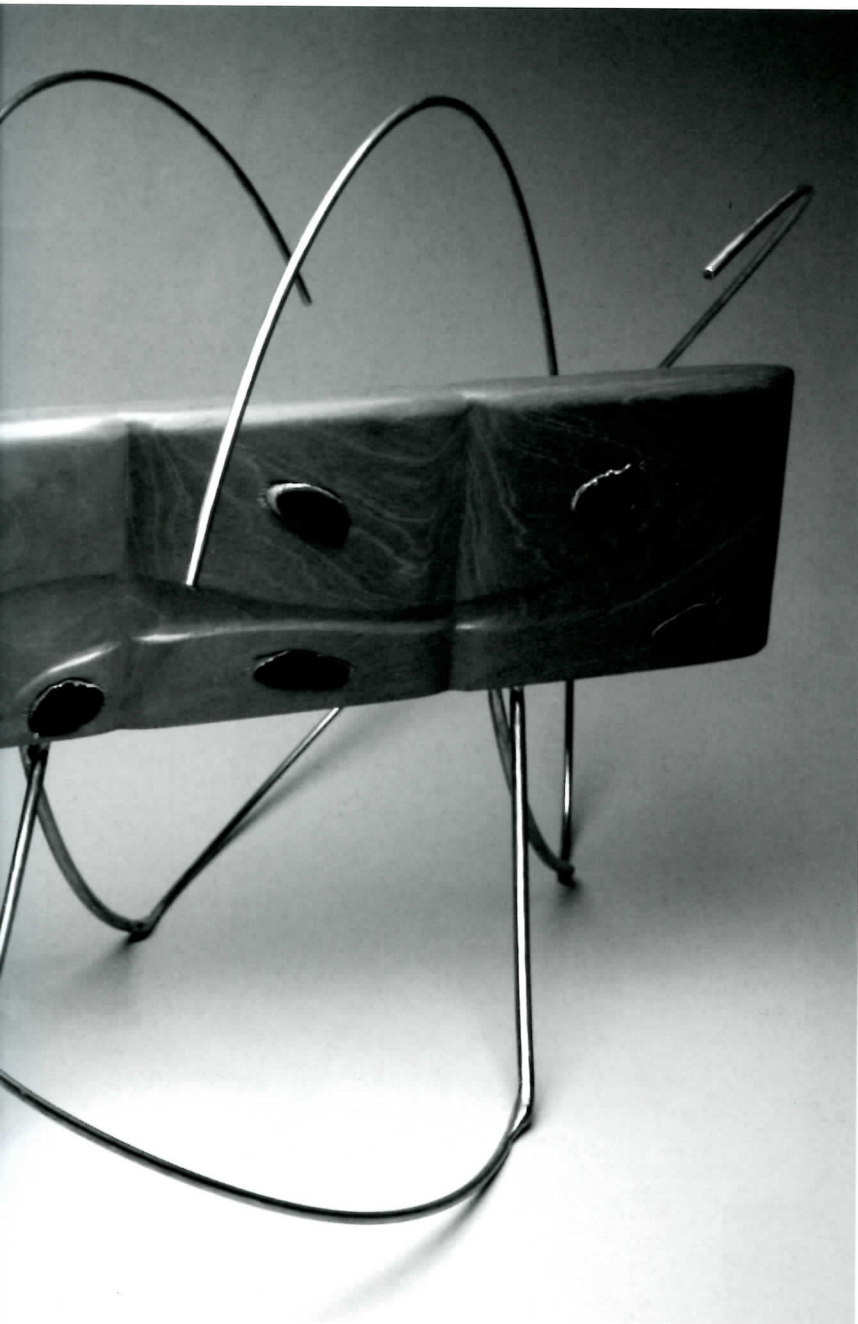
don't be.

i'd say 'yes' to just about anything if you'd just ask.
just ask. please, just ask.

my temperature is subsiding.
you aren't walking up the stairs as i wait here.
i wish there was something in me that could
just will you to me.

Draw you north like a south-facing magnet
i'd say 'yes' to just about anything if you'd just ask.
just ask. please, just ask.





Sculpture

COLETTE BUREAU

A Bonsai Plant

TALMEEZ F. BURNEY

The triumph of human
vigor, creativity
and imagination over land.



Raku Sculpture with Steel MIRTHA AERTKER

CASSANDRA ANDREWS

An eight by eleven measure
Of blank white space
This heavenly place
My sanctuary

Three arms in the center
One radius, one diameter
With silent pulse
And stagnant tick-tock

The mind lays dormant, quiet and dead
Then waves of thought flood the head
Like turbulent currents that ebb and flow
Creating a noisy silence as they go

The mind explodes
The fingers bleed
Black droplets seep
Onto the blank white space

They stretch and bind
Dots morph into line
They twist and turn in all manner of bow and box
Reviled sincerity, epic truth, the epistemic paradox

In this checkered space
I am not always right, but I'm never wrong
For amidst the cacophony
Forthwith honesty spawned

In this fragment of time
Here, with word and rhyme
Creativity gives birth to me

Ode to Painted Toenails

KRIS VALIS

pudgy piggies
don glossy pink bathing suits
lured by the sun
wallowing in the warmth
of an early summer day

pulchritudinous piggies
match rhinestones and flower vines
ready for fun
rooting out the front
of convertible carriages

JACOB NORTEY

I dance freely in the eye of the sun
To the beautiful sound of nature's music.
From a distance, I could hear the trees singing,
Making a joyful noise with their hands clapping.

For the majesty of a mighty waterfall
Brings all creatures together, both mild and wild,
Drinking away their thirst into a long lasting life
At the dawn of every new season.

The life and splendor of the earth's greatest light,
Has come to an end, as his successor is enthroned.
In the dazzling sparkles of the night sky,
I run naked in the forest under the moonlight.





Mighty RAQUEL ARZVALDA

Oedipus Rex Meets Teiresias at Wal-Mart

R. SCOTT YARBROUGH

I can never find a parking spot by the door. What
I wouldn't give to be handicapped sometime. Get
one of those wheelchair stickers, which, by the way, a clubfoot
doesn't qualify. I could kill that guy in the Hummer who cut me
off, like he's manager or something. Damn Walmart.

I'm here to return my wife's, "Do it Yourself: Family Tree"
PC disk, in trade for a pair of toga brooches. How
do you wear out a brooch? Stick it "again" and "again"
and "again?" Honestly, sometimes she treats me like a boy; her
little Ashton. That was mean. Creon, her
worthless brother, just sits around on his ass all day.

"Have a return?" Name tag Teiresias. There's one
for the Baby's Name book. "Just a disk; not opened."
"Sure you don't want to take a look at that?"
His blind person stick nudges my foot like a hint.
I hate interrogations. "Well, have a smiley
face sticker and give my regards to your family."
I put the sticker in my pocket so Ismene can
have it when I get home. "Could I get one
more; Antigone will just hang herself if Ismene
gets one and she doesn't. Just like her mother."

I find the woman's accessories aisle - Togas, laurels,
choreographing chorus cards, herbs for alters,
wrinkle cream, drapes, sphinx repellent - then, there they are, solid
silver with zirconium heads, brooches perfect enough for a queen.
Women don't ever know what we go through to please them,
such a riddle.

I check out with just a chorus of people all bitchin'
about how horrible the country's immigration policy is
and the failing economy and the drought. 'This exchange is
going to be tragic,' I think to myself; then, almost like fate;
I get some older displaced farm worker who used to do odd
jobs for me on the mountain behind the house and he
recognizes me, really knows his stuff. Seems like he was in
an awful hurry though; no real time to chit-chat.

I pass the glasses shop on my way to the door and remind
myself to get an eye exam, *soon*. "Be sure and keep that
receipt," Teiresias smiles a cookie sweet dough wrapped
around obesity smile. Where do they get these people
anyway? I hold up my bag, like a secret, like they want you
to, like you found the meaning of life at Walmart. I notice
the sun falling over the red western sky, a candy sundrop
fame flashing gone. How much time have I wasted on this
one errand in the wilderness?

"You might need to return something," he adds.

"You might need to return something," I say sarcastically
under my breath. What a know-it-all. And to think all
I have to look forward to at home is whether or not
the two boys have settled their argument yet.
I might as well wish my life away to retirement
in the white clouds and calm of Mt. Kithaeron.

An Alternate Mirror

DANIEL HIRUNRUSME

Sometimes when I look
Into the mirror I see myself as
Unattractive. So, I found an
Even uglier person to
Marry.

SUSAN BLICK

It was just yesterday
when you wore
that blue dress I liked
the one that matched your eyes
and they were twinkling
when you pulled
the cookies from the oven
I sat waiting at the table
my legs dangling from the chair
a tall cool glass of milk
waited patiently with me
for the mustache it would make
on my upper lip
I looked at you
while you blew
on those sweet little circles
not wanting them to burn my mouth
You smiled at me
when you gave me the plate
with two cookies on it
that wouldn't spoil my dinner

The afternoon sun
streamed in the window
and it lit up your face
like you were the Madonna
At that moment
when the air was filled
with the sweet scent of home
and you were humming
Nat King Cole
I couldn't have loved you more
And now I know
there will never be another
like you
And no cookie will ever taste the same
as the ones you baked
on the day you wore
that blue dress I liked



On This Blue Black Summer's Night

CHELSEA M. GOUGH

As sunset came
Street lights flickered on
The burning concrete
Began to cool
As this small town's mood
Slowly toned down
The tiny shops locked up

The sky painting itself pink
As the beachfront cleared
The water called
Footprints to the doors
And flip-flop left outside
As pink turns to blue
And blue turns to black

Stars begin to shine
Reflecting softly on the waves
As two lovers enter this scene
Hands weaved together
They come to meet just once more
On this blue black summer's night

ALEXIS POOLE

Your shirt—easy-breathing cotton polo—taunts
me with every stitch, every thread that somehow
grazed the warm, tender skin that loves me so.

But it's just warmth
And it's just cloth.

Your voice—smooth, sweet and deep—melts
away my fears, melts away all my nervousness;
it makes me comfortable and free to be me with you.

But it's just contentment
And it's just a tone.

Your scent—lavender, manliness and love—lingers
under my nose, like air itself, bringing with it gentle
memories of freezing nights and your warming me in your protective hold.

But they're just memories
And it's just a scent.
And I've never known you.

Phoenix

LAURA PERDOMO

I sing a song that is eternal.
It is the whisper of the wind,
The murmur of the stream,
The swish of the grasses.
My song is the voice of Earth herself,
it warms,
it loves,
it calms the fierce tempest and the crying of gentle babes.

I burn with golden flame,
Bright and luminous as the sun,
to warm the creatures and the forests.
My light is the light in the darkness.
My fire is rebirth.
From the ashes we are all born.
To the ash we all return, in a cycle.
That is the beautiful dichotomy of nature.
My tears are more potent than any medicine,
Not mere salt and water, but life
and love,
and that which nourishes and gives strength.
Freely, I weep so that others may heal.
I never cry in sorrow.
How can any creature be melancholy,
when there is life to live?

I fly alone
Over mountains and plains,
and all the great realms of Earth,
singing, burning, weeping.
I give myself to all life,
Servant of the Earth and Sky,
And for it, I am alone and unique on this earth.
And so I will be forever.



Sculpture SUZANNE HESS

ROBERT A. HOWARD

*It had started as just another Saturday afternoon,
like the countless others that have passed lazily by
without anything the least bit exciting happening.*

My son, a little fellow barely a knee high, kept himself entertained by spinning the recliner in circles while babbling something completely incomprehensible to us over-two folk at least. This was one of his favorite pastimes, actually. It was as if the extended foot of the recliner taunted him, demanding to be pushed. So, for hours, he'd walk, round and around, holding on to the foot of the recliner, circling on and on in true Conan-style. Needless to say, this was quite an amusing sight, since a feather could probably give the boy a run for his money in the weight department.

To be honest, I half expected that by the time he learned to walk on his own that he'd be built like a little baby-Schwarzenegger. We'd been trying for months to coax him to walk or even stand on his own. He was more than capable, but he just hadn't yet realized that he could walk unassisted. Today, he decided to surprise us though.

Looking over from the recliner to the couch, the boy examined his options. The gap between the two was just a bit too far for him to hand-walk across. You could see the indecision in his eyes. He could plop down and crawl the two feet, but then he'd have to get up again—what a chore! Or, he could take the risk. Timidly, he determined to take the Nestea-plunge and took his first few steps into a brave new world. We were nothing less than ecstatic. If that had been all that had happened, we still would have been talking about it for weeks, but it wasn't.

Seeing the delight in our eyes, Jason grinned and walked back across the great divide the whole two feet to the recliner. This time though, he walked with confidence. Deciding that this was a far more efficient way to move about, he started walking all over the house—walking, then running.

Oh, but what had we unleashed? He was quicker than quick, running from room to room and getting into all kinds of things as we tried to chase him down. When at last he decided to slow down, he turned to me and said, "Da Da?" This wasn't anything new, he'd been babbling "da, da, da, da, da," for months, but nonetheless, I'd always answer, "Yes, boy?"

"Can I go show my girlfriend how I can walk now," he asked.

In the first place, I was shocked—he had a girlfriend at his age? I must have misunderstood what my wife meant by "play date." And, since when could he talk? Shocked, I looked to my wife, who just shrugged unknowingly.

"Uh... I don't think now is a good time, boy," I replied when words would finally come to me.

"But, da-da!"

It had started already. Here he was, at fifteen months old already arguing with his father. I'd have nothing of that.

"Jason! No. Not today," I said, interrupting his protest. Put off, he ran to his room and slammed the door behind him.

Completely mystified, I turned to my wife. It was all too much for her though, and at that moment her eyes rolled back into her head and she fell to the ground like a sack of potatoes. Fortunately, I was able to catch her mid-fall and then carry her to the bedroom so she could lie down. From the boy's room, I could hear much cussing and spitting. He was quite worked up.

After getting my wife situated, I returned to the boy's room and found the door open. Peering in, there was no sign of my son. In fact, there was no sign of him anywhere in the house. Frantically, I looked everywhere I could think of that a tiny tike could possibly hide, but he was nowhere to be found. At last, I checked the front door and found it unlocked and my car keys gone. This did not bode well. Running out to the driveway, I was just in time to see Jason peeling-rubber down the street in my brand new car.

Now, this is where the story gets a little strange. Apparently, while he was out cruising the town he spotted a cat stuck way up on the top of a telephone pole. He had neglected to also steal my cell phone, so he had no way to call for help, and who would take *him* seriously anyway? So, he parked the car in the only way he knew how, head-on into the pole. He and I would have words about responsible driving later on when I saw the damage, but at least, having such a limber little body kept him from hurting himself.

Whatever imbecile had constructed this telephone pole had neglected to take into account someone one-foot-eleven when spacing the climbing rungs, so there was only one thing to be done. Leaping from the car, he ran straight up that pole—had he a firmer understanding of the laws of gravity, this would have been nigh impossible, but if Wile E. Coyote could do it, well so could he.

The cat, who had seen many things out on the streets of Dallas, didn't know quite what to make of this scene. But like any smart cat, he knew that babies and kitties just don't mix, and the sight of my boy charging up the pole was incentive enough for him to overcome his fear of coming back down. And down the cat went, falling more than climbing, but landing squarely on his feet, which were pumping even as he fell, so that when he hit the ground, he was already running.

The boy, having done his good deed, came back down to survey the damage. The grill of the car was concaved and one of the tires had been gashed. He correctly surmised that dad was going to be a little upset about this. Grabbing the tire iron and jack out of the trunk, he then set to work replacing the flat with a spare. Once done, he headed home, because by this point he was hungry and he was pretty sure he needed a diaper-change.

And that was the day my son took his first steps. We, of course, had a long talk when he returned from his joy ride, but I have to admit, I was proud of my son. After taking those first few steps, everything had really clicked for him. In a single day, he was walking, talking, spitting, cussing; he stole my car, took a drive, saved a cat, changed a flat, and he told me all about it when he got back, while smoking a cigar.



Time Flies VALERIE JOBE



Untitled CORY GRAHAM



Heroine's Autograph

KELLY MOORE

I am a princess who has been shunned by her people.

It happened the day the test read "positive."

For years I stood by their side

Protecting them, saving them.

But who will save me now that I'm alone?

I am a princess who has been infected.

It happened the night I met sweet Ms. Hazel.

Man, she sent me on a trip

Over the rainbow, through the window.

Mom didn't mean "needles" when she said to share.

But she was a princess once, too.

And she met Al Capone at the crisp age of fifteen.

He did her good. Not at all like Ms. Hazel did me.

But her people didn't shun her.

They simply turned their faces away.

My mother was a princess who ruled with Capone.

He made her a queen and a mother, the same.

So why can't she see?

She knows how it feels

To meet someone so famous and die from the trip.

R. SCOTT YARBROUGH

For Bill Hall

He used a German Luger his father toted
back from WWII. Imagine what that gun
had to do to get back to Abilene, Willis Street.
It could have just as easily rusted under sand
on Omaha beach or pushed up flowers in a garden
in Moulin Rouge. But someone decided
it needed to float an ocean. He shot himself in the chest.

Suicide is a secret that is just about to spill and color
the earth a color besides blood red. Blood is easier.

He was left handed, so he would have had
to hold the barrel with his right
just away from his chest and pull
the trigger with the thumb and index of his left
hand, like a looking glass searching for a purpose.

I mean, suppose the calculation. Suppose
he would have hung himself: cutting the rope;
is it strong enough; which tree; how far
should I fall before it catches; the measuring
tape; looking up "Hangman's Noose."

That might
be where he saw a picture of the human heart,
in the "H's," and how it's just to the left of center
like he was.

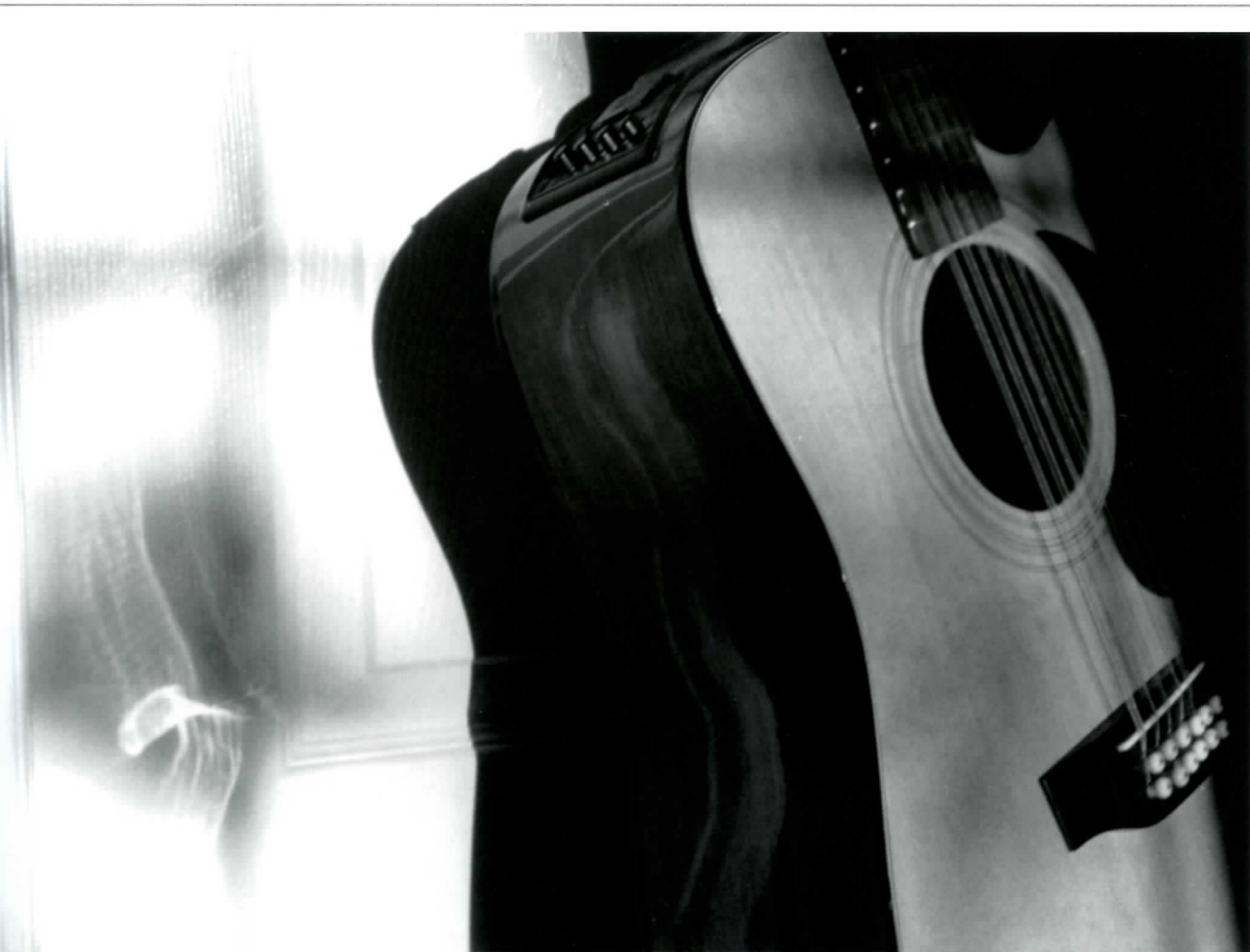
Then, he must have considered
how that indifferent bullet with hollow head
would spread and push its way into his heart
like an instant cancer, indifferent.

Suicide is everything that leads up to it. But ultimately
it is that second when one jumps or pulls or thinks
the world is better off without them. None are right and
he was wrong. We needed him suffering or not.

So now I'll have to make my own Colorado Bulldogs
at the family reunion and apologize for my fingers
trembling off the neck of my guitar during his eulogy.
Now, I'll have to try to remember his megaphone laugh
and his Texas running shorts pulled up so high you
could see his jewels.

What was so bad that a bottle
of wine and key lime pie couldn't cure?

I really wish he wouldn't have done that.



The Guitar VALERIE JOBE

JULIE ROSENTEL

Dedicated to Pat at the Spring Creek Campus Writing Center

Idioms, jargon, faddish language to boot,
Gerund phrases clichés run amuck; they're a hoot.
Dangling modifiers climb unhindered throughout,
Whilst demonstrative pronouns detract from the clout.

Oh what a sinner forlorn and for-lost
Can anyone save me from adverbial clauses,
Infinitive phrases, and intransitive verbs?

But wait, what's this that I see?

Language heroes are waiting
To wade through the mire
Thwart back the language,
Find a thesis for hire.
They'll split your infinitives, destroy additive phrases,
Save you from wordiness and idiom mazes.

These modern day prophets,
These saviors from doom
Reside in the Library,
I meet them at noon.
Gone are my comma splices, don't miss them a bit.
For me a trip to the Writing Center is
Always a hit.

GREGORY C. MCCLURE

Welcome, pawn, to the chess game of gods.
Take your place; it's up front playing guard.
Don't worry, you're not in danger yet.
On the verge, but not in danger yet.

Stare for now – enjoy the moment's peace.
Hold for now, tranquility will cease.
When it does, you will be stripped of rest.
At the charge, you will be stripped of rest.

Soon enough, the moment will be past.
So don't rush; this breath could be your last.
It comes quick – like a pain in the heart.
It kills quick – like a pain in the heart.

We start now! Show me your allegiance.
Charge to war! Show them your defiance!
Don't be scared, every man has his end.
It's nature, every man meets his end.

Silly pawn, don't fight so forcefully.
You can't win, so go down gracefully.
You thought what? No, you weren't meant to win.
Know your place, you just weren't meant to win.

Farewell, pawn, from the chess game of gods.
I'm so proud; you were such a good guard.
Served me well – that's just as it should be.
Died in war – that's just as it should be.



Sculpture CAROLYN HELVEY

BECKY LEWIS

I used to be an evangelist. Well, ok, not a real evangelist.

*I never got on TV and said God would make you rich if
you gave me money or stood on a street corner holding a placard,
railing at the masses to repent or burn in hell.*

I did, however, join a march once in downtown Dallas. Singing praises to God, I held a placard, but I can't remember what it said. And I belonged to a non-denominational, Bible-thumping, charismatic, hands-in-the-air, face-on-the-floor evangelical church. I was there every time the doors opened and I tried very hard to be a good evangelist. I just couldn't get the hang of it; I never felt comfortable telling people to either surrender their lives to a loving God or they would char in the great toaster below. It just never sat right with me.

The beginning of the end came when my spiritual mentor and idol decided that I was possessed. I had crossed her on a spiritual point relating to another girl. (Ann had her own disciples. A posse of five or six girls who thought she channeled God. She used to sequester herself in her apartment to fast and pray. I remember going over there after one of these episodes. I could tell she hadn't slept. Her eyes were on fire as she paced and prophesied. We thought she was the holiest thing walking the planet.) It was such a minor thing, I don't even remember what it was about, but I do remember time standing still for a few seconds. Neither of us spoke. There was electricity in the air. Then, she said, "What just happened?" and I said "I don't know" but I was shaking. I had never crossed her before. She coerced my best friend into a deliverance intervention. They kidnapped me and took me to Ann's apartment.

"Ann. I'm not possessed!"

"Don't you speak to me you demon from hell!" she screamed.

"But Ann..."

"Come out of her in the name of Jesus!"

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Jesus for sale
NICK YOUNG

This went on for quite some time, my claiming to be me, her claiming I was a demon. I don't think my friend knew what to think, so she mostly kept her head down in prayer, looking up occasionally, wild-eyed. Being the relatively normal, sane, God-loving, demon-fearing person I was, I freaked out. Really freaked out. I prefer not to remember the gruesome details, so suffice to say I had, what I now understand to have been, a three day panic attack. It was hell. But God, in his mercy (oh, yes, I still believe in God), brought me out of it.

There were two scriptures that worked their magic on me; "Christ in you, the hope of glory" and "It is God who works in you to will and to do according to his good pleasure." After reading these two scriptures over and over again, I suddenly understood that being a Christian meant that God lived in me and any changes that needed to be made, He would make; that if He wanted me to do something, He would lead me to it; if He wanted me to say something, He would put the words in my mouth. I didn't have to strive for perfection. God would work out perfection in me, or not, according to his good pleasure. I started laughing. For the first time in three days, I was full of joy and I truly felt like a different person. I even made people start calling me "Becky" instead of "Rebekah." (I had been called "Becky" until I started my career and decided "Becky" wasn't sophisticated enough.) "Becky" was who I really was. Not pretentious "Rebekah." Needless to say, my relationship with Ann was never the same.

You would think this enough of an epiphany but no, like the Jews who wandered in the desert for forty years because they seemed to forget God's miracles as soon as they happened, I lost the wonder of it rather quickly. It was still inside and I still understood the truth of it, but I guess it needed to ferment. It was only the first epiphany. There was another to come.

After my unfortunate episode with Ann, I joined a women's group at church. About a year later, it was decided that I would lead my own women's group. Me? In leadership? Are they nuts? They must be desperate. At first I refused, but then a small voice inside said, "In ministering, you will be healed." Ah, a paradox. Like, "Those who teach, learn." "If you build it, they will come." Ok, I get it. I'll give it a shot. I loved to preach anyway. Only to the choir, of course, who soaked it in like dry sponges and praised the wisdom God had given me. Preaching to the unwashed masses, who weren't interested and seemed to have an unholy force field around their hearts, was much less satisfying. So it went well for awhile until, in our leadership

meetings, I started recognizing the manipulation they were asking us to inflict, not only on our poor flock but also on the unwashed masses. Then I started noticing it in our church services.

People want to be accepted and loved. They want to feel worthy. In church, this is doubly so; no, this is quadrupally so. From the pulpit, we received the mixed messages that God loves us, but only if we love Him; He forgives us, but only if we ask for it and try to live perfect lives; He wants a relationship with us, but only if we hold our tongues just right. During our sometimes two hour worship services (this is two hours before the preaching started) people would speak in tongues, cry, fall prostrate on the floor, laugh, prophesy, and the list goes on. Sometimes I didn't get it. Why was that person reacting that way? What was God doing with them and why wasn't He doing it with me. There had to be something wrong with me.

I soon realized, however, that it was not just me. I began to understand that most people felt this way but instead of wondering about it, they would mimic the behavior in an effort to one, be accepted as spiritual by those around them and two, hoping that God would find them worthy enough to make it real. I began to see how people strove with God and each other to be accepted and loved and to feel worthy.

Ok, guilty. As previously mentioned, I did my own striving with God and with the other members of the tired and sick Body of Christ. I remember getting up at five o'clock in the morning so that I could pray and read my Bible, seeking God's wisdom and leadership. I listened only to Christian music (the rest of it was obviously deviant), read only Christian books and the Bible

I didn't have to strive for perfection.

(others would corrupt my morals), watched only Christian television (ditto), had only Christian art on my walls (so my eyes would see only what was beautiful and holy), threw away all my old books and albums (I still cry about that), had a fish on my car, stopped smoking and drinking, went to Church four or five times a week and successfully alienated my family and non-Christian friends. I would beg God to make me like the great evangelists, John the Baptist, Elijah, Joyce Meyers. I would go to prayer meetings to wage war with the devil. I begged God to love me, to forgive me, to make me like Jesus. It was pathetic.

I started having panic attacks, regular and severe. At first, I didn't know what they were and thought that God was punishing me for something. The feeling was too much like the one I had when Ann announced I was possessed. I prayed and cried and begged God for forgiveness. It wasn't until later that I went

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to the doctor and found out that the feeling was not real in the sense that it was caused by a chemical imbalance in my brain. He gave me tranquilizers which made them go away temporarily and then, later, an anti-depressant.

However, in the meantime, we had a revival at church. Prophets came in and did their thing. People crowded the church hoping they would be “chosen by God” to have “a word” spoken over them. People were going to the altar to have someone lay hands on them, where they would then fall to the floor in a faint, presumably with the power of God running through them to cleanse and beautify. I went to the altar too, but nothing happened, except one of the elder’s wives said that God was going to change my life. Yeah, whatever. Thanks. I went back to my seat in tears and my best friend leaned over and said, “God’s timing is perfect.” What? What! God’s timing is perfect? What the hell is that supposed to mean? Here I am having panic attacks, thinking that God is angry with me. I’m trying to lead a group of women, some of whom have lives that are way out of my league to help. I’ve got an angry husband, a stressful job, and all I want is to fall on the floor and feel God’s power flow through me. God’s timing is perfect?

That was it, the proverbial last straw. Something inside broke. I left the church then. I knew I had to. I knew God wanted me to, but I didn’t really understand why. Suddenly, all of the striving stopped. I couldn’t do it anymore. I stopped praying. Well, at least regularly. No more church, no more worship and no more Bibles. I moved from Irving to Dallas. I let my son listen to non-Christian music. I let my husband put his Gauguin back on the wall (Gauguin’s art being half nude women in Tahiti). I felt lost. I wasn’t sure who I was anymore. But somehow, I knew I was in the right place.

Then one day, I was in a bookstore and ran across a book called “Dark Night of the Soul” written by a monk in the 14th century. I opened the book out of curiosity; after all, I did feel I was having my own dark night of the soul, and found that he was describing to me exactly what I was going through. He talked about how a new convert will go off on an emotional high and tell everyone how Jesus saved him (her, in my case) but then, at some point, the high wears off which leads the convert to strive for the high to return. He talked about God’s desire for us to trust that he loves and cares for us even when we don’t feel it. It was a difficult read but it said exactly what I needed to hear.

I began journaling my thoughts and, one day, as I was thinking about the striving and the desire to be God's great (evangelical) voice on the earth, I had a vision. Not a vision like I was taken to the heavens and shown angels and trumpets and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. No, it was just a picture in my mind of this huge, fire-breathing monster of a man/animal, roaring and waving his arms about, and I knew I was seeing a picture of what I had envisioned a "good Christian" to be. Here was my cross between John the Baptist and Elijah, breathing fire down from heaven, calling for repentance and burning up all the chaff along the way. And, in that moment, I heard a small voice inside say "That is not me. That is not who you were created to be." I picked up my Bible and found passages that described Jesus as gentle and kind, healing and loving all those around him, riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. "This is who I am," said that small voice, "and this is who you are meant to be."

Have you ever heard of "thought clusters?" Someone once told me that most people think in clusters of thought, as opposed to linear thought: once sentence after another. Well, in that moment, I had a cluster thought. I felt so much love and acceptance from the One I needed it from the most. All at once, I remembered the first epiphany about no need for striving. I remembered when I was a teenager doing drugs, sleeping around and drinking myself into the toilet, someone asked me

"How can you believe God loves you when you do the things you

I went to the altar too, but nothing happened...

do." And I said, "Because God is my father. He loves me no matter what I do. If you had a daughter and she was doing drugs or sleeping around or even killed someone, would you stop loving her? No, you wouldn't because she is your daughter and you love her no matter what. Well, that's how God is. I'm his daughter and He loves me no matter what."

Out of the mouths of babes. What ever happened to that girl? That girl grew up and was corrupted by the non-denominational, Bible-thumping, charismatic, hands-in-the-air, face-on-the-floor evangelical church. But, that girl was still me. And I understood in a moment that I had gotten it all screwed up.

God is not about punishment. He's not about following rules. He's about love. He is love. When we love someone or someone loves us, that's God. When we act kindly toward someone, when we feel compassion or empathy, when we give, that's God. God is not tearing down the house, so to speak, so He can rebuild

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it; He is building it, brick by brick, as we live and breathe. He is our breath. And there is nothing, absolutely nothing that we can say or do or think that can separate us from that love, even if we wanted to. So, what is there to fear? Nothing. And that became my new motto: "No fear," just like the Nike commercial.

So, ok. Wow! I pondered this for awhile and, being the relatively normal, sane, God-loving, demon-fearing person that I was, I had to test it out. I went back to Egypt, in a manner of speaking. I started listening to rock first. Man that was good; I had missed it so much. God didn't smite me. No panic. My car didn't break down and I didn't get sick. Cool. So then I started reading non-Christian books. I actually got interested in Buddhist thought. Still no fire down from heaven. No small voice reprimanding me. My son said "I love you" and my husband was happier. I started having a beer now and then. Still nothing and slowly I began to believe it. Really believe it.

It's been many years now. I don't want you to get the idea that nothing bad ever happens to me or that I'm always happy. No. But, I am peaceful most of the time; even when the bad things happen. I still don't go to church or read the Bible but I love God and I talk to him a lot, mostly to say "thank you" but sometimes to ask for things. Recently, my son was diagnosed with bi-polar disorder. He's been deeply depressed and suicidal. I get scared sometimes, but then I remember that God loves him more than I do and He's building my son's house, too. Life is hard sometimes, unfair. We're not perfect yet, so we screw things up and make life imperfect. And, of course, the old adage "we learn from our mistakes" is only sometimes true.

Am I still a Christian? I think so. I just can't buy into the church anymore. I used to be angry. I guess I still get angry sometimes, but not for myself. I think that, just like the Pharisees of old, the church lays a burden on us that we we're not meant to carry. We don't need the burden of worrying about whether or not God loves us or approves of us. He never intended that for us. "Come to me all who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest." Rest, yes, from fear and worry about hell which (admit it) is why most want God to love them, so they don't go to hell. I'm not sure I believe in hell anymore anyway. At least, not the way the church thinks of hell. Even if there is a hell, it is not intended for us. Why would God want to put his children in a place like that? Besides, we are more than capable, and apparently willing, to create our own hell on earth. We don't need a devil or demon for that. No. We just need to trust God and leave demons and hell to him.



K2 Walk PAUL BELLAH

To Be Forgotten

GREGORY C. MCCLURE

Please, do not forget me;

There is no greater tragedy.

Nothing could end more horribly.

Please, do not forget me.

Please, do remember me;

Nothing to me is more dear than this.

No more intimate, higher wish.

Please, do remember me.

JULIE JEWETT

The almshouse matrons sit, wearing their
broad, smooth collars and shirt cuffs like
placques hung on a wall
declaring this almshouse to be "The
cleanest in all of the Netherlands," or recipient of
"1664's Best Place for Old Men to Go to Die"

Did all those poor men see these women as angels,
with their white collars and faces like candle flames
flickering up out of the darkness
Did they look with eyes straining
upward from their bowed heads,
at each woman, as each cutting gaze met their own

And when those women looked back at some
peasant or pauper with trembling hands held
tight to his stomach, did their expressions change
at all, or remain fixed as if
carved out of granite

Flying Back

BETH TURNER AYERS

The grackles
Seem ever present
With their squawk
And the splat
Baking on my windshield
But their feathers shine
In bright sun
Like circles in oily puddles
A shimmering rainbow
Shattered with a squawk
A piece of my past glides by
In a graceful dive across the road
The memory circles to perch
High, alone on a wire
Split tail feathers speak to me
Of happy Oklahoma springs
Thoughts of days gone by
Shattered by a squawk
The scissor-tail flycatcher
Lifts away from Texas grackles
The search for a mate continues
On a journey toward home

Veil

NAFISA HAQUE

I can be of many colors-
black, white, green;
I become fancier when my body is pierced.
I'm worth more when I have colorful tattoos on
me.
Only a piece of cloth,
am I?

I look at her as she gets ready for work.
She checks herself in the mirror.
Oh my, she looks so pretty!
Then she puts me on.
She is now
a mystery to every man she passes.
She steps out to the world
invulnerable.
Comes back secured and safe,
and opens me:
making me feel special;
revealing her beauty to me.
Only me,
since puberty.

Chinese Beauty
REBECCA LEWIS



LINDA DAVIS

Nicky woke to the sound of Whitey crowing loudly from the porch railing just outside her bedroom window.

She groaned, rolled over and snuggled up closer to Pepper and Sammy, not ready to give up sleep just yet.

Sleep had become her sanctuary lately. It was a place to retreat from Eddie, especially since he had decided he could no longer sleep well in their bed. In the past year he had gradually started spending most nights upstairs in the daybed in his office, and that was fine with her. She had begun to hate the touch of his hand on her body. It was always the feeling of need, never love. The loneliness had grown over the years and the only joy and love she felt now came from the two big dogs snoring quietly by her side.

Moving to this house a few years before had been a dream for Nicky. It was a big two story house in the country, located at the end of a long winding gravel road. There was a large pond and acres of woods to enjoy and plenty of room for animals. It truly should have been a paradise for Nicky and Eddie, but in truth, the peacefulness of the place only seemed to amplify their problems. Nicky loved her husband and had been playing the "it'll get better when..." game for too many years. It'll get better when he gets a better job that isn't so stressful...makes more money... when we can buy a house...when we move..., but nothing ever seemed to make Eddie happy.

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Morning REBECCA LEWIS

Thanks to modern technology, Eddie could work from home most days and only have to travel to his office in the city for meetings. Nicky began spending more and more time working outdoors, in the garden, in the fields on the tractor, mowing the huge lawn, clearing brush in the woods, or tending to the animals. She did anything to avoid saying or doing the wrong thing around Eddie. Constantly walking on egg shells around him could become overwhelming and sometimes sleep offered the only real escape.

So as Nicky lay in bed that morning enjoying the cool breeze and the warmth of the two big dogs next to her she drifted off to sleep again, only to be awakened again by the crowing of the big rooster. Frustrated, she threw back the covers, got out of bed and made her way through the house to the dining room and the door that led to the side and front porch. She intended to run the big rooster off with a shot of cold water from the garden hose and then to crawl back into her warm bed. But strangely, when she reached the door she found it unlocked and Eddie's truck gone from the driveway. Thinking he must have run an errand and had just forgotten to lock the door, she stepped out onto the side porch ready to remove the feathered alarm clock from his perch beside her window. She had only gone a few steps when she first heard and then saw the white van speeding down the road towards her house. She raced back inside and through the house to her bedroom to change from her short cotton gown to shorts and a t-shirt. But before she could get back to the door, two men were already inside the house. At the same time that Nicky was getting dressed, Pepper and Sammy had gone out through their dog door and into the fenced backyard to bark at the arriving van.

This was wrong she thought. Strange men don't just enter your home without ringing the doorbell or knocking. And these two big men had to have been moving fast to already be inside. Nicky was shocked and terrified, but knew she had to stay calm and not show her fear. She met them as they were just a step or two inside the door. Not allowing them to move further into the house she asked them if she could help them. This seemed to throw them off a bit, as if they were not expecting this kind of reaction. At that moment the dogs ran back inside the house and Nicky,

while never taking her eyes off the two men, commanded both dogs to sit. The whole situation was weird, but the dogs' behavior made it even more so. As if sensing the combination of fear and calmness from their owner, the dogs sat alert and quiet on each side of her. One of the men said they were there to check for mold in the house. Sternly, she told the men that they had the wrong house. Unbelievably, they kept insisting they were at the right place, but Nicky refused to back down or be intimidated. The men finally left and she quickly locked the door and watched them drive away. These men wore no identifying clothing and the van had no company logo.

More than an hour passed before Eddie came home and in that time Nicky had finally stopped shaking. She met him at the door and asked where he had been and why had he left the door unlocked. His reply was that he had gone to the store and he hadn't realized that he had left the door unlocked. She told him what had taken place that morning and he asked if she had called and reported the incident to the sheriff's office. It had never even occurred to her to call anyone, besides she didn't have any useful information like names or a license plate number, just as it didn't occur to her until sometime later that he didn't have anything to show for his trip to the store.

*Strange men don't enter your home
without ringing the doorbell or knocking.*

A week passed and neither of them spoke about what happened on that morning. Then the next week Eddie had to go in to the office in the city. Nicky hadn't slept well since that day the men came to her house and before dawn she heard Eddie upstairs showering and getting ready to leave. As she lay there in bed, she listened as he came down the stairs and left the house. She heard the truck door shut and the engine start. She stroked the fur of the dogs beside her and listened to the crunching sound of the gravel under the tires of the truck as he drove away. She waited until she couldn't hear the sound of the truck any more. And still she waited, not yet ready to confirm what she knew she would find. Finally, she could wait no longer and she walked through the dark house to the side door. There, she found the door just as she knew she would- unlocked.

VALERIE WALKER

*The first time I heard "The Young and The Hopeless"
by Good Charlotte, I was lying in a bed, waking up to realize
that I had used some guy's bare back as a pillow last night.*

It wasn't my bed. My bed had orange and pink striped sheets with a purple comforter. This bed had black sheets that smelled like cigarette smoke. I could feel the guy's skin under my cheek, the curve of his shoulder blade, the fluid rise and fall of his breathing. My stomach pressed against the taper of his side, my hand low on his hip. I froze in that tender embrace, my heart trying to break through my rib cage

This was definitely not my room. My room had a poster of Clay Aiken over the top of my bed, a poster of Tim McGraw over my computer desk, and a satin purple dress hanging in a dry cleaning bag on the back of my door. This room didn't know the meaning of the word vacuum. Black light posters with images of mushrooms, peace signs, and frogs in the center of swirls of brilliant colors covered every inch of the wall space. The closet door hung open, but the clothes lay crumpled on the floor instead of on the hangers. The bathroom door was missing, the doorway covered in a curtain of black and red beads swept to one side by a shoelace thumbtacked to the door jam. The nightstand held an overflowing ashtray, several cigarette lighters, and a pack of Marlboros.

The punk song filtered underneath the closed bedroom door to where I lay on the bed, snuggled up to this stranger. Voices mingled with the music, and I recognized my sister's bleating laugh.

She was laughing. How in the hell could she be in the next room laughing? I was supposed to walk across a stage and get my diploma tonight, graduating with all of the extra stoles and tassels around my neck. I wasn't supposed to be waking up in a bed with some random guy. I had a full scholarship to The University of Texas, something I sacrificed my sleep and any hope of a social life to earn. And now, now I was lying on this guy, unable to think past the beer to remember how I ended up in this bedroom.

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Bar Glasses VALERIE JOBE

I turned my eyes up, not moving my face. I didn't want him to feel me move. I saw the tribal tattoo stretching from his shoulder to my head. I knew it continued past my head to the opposite shoulder, that the thick twisting black lines burned high across his back, trickled down the back of his arms, and teased up the back of his neck. I knew this because I remembered tracing the black lines with my fingertips, my tongue.

Holy crap, I was not supposed to be here. I inched off of the bed as slowly as possible, careful not to shake the mattress and jostle the guy. When I was clear of the bed I jerked upright, a move the beer did not approve of. My hands flew up to press against my eyelids, trying to keep the pounding inside my skull from popping my eyes out of their sockets. I felt something gushing up my throat and ran for the bathroom, lurching under the beaded curtain, and dropping to my knees on the nasty floor. I vomited. I vomited until I thought my stomach and intestines might fall out of my mouth, and then I vomited some more.

I was breathing hard, panting over the toilet bowl. At least no noise came from the bedroom. I stood up slowly this time, bracing myself against the countertop. The mirror showed me in all of my glory. Naked, pale, smeared makeup and crumpled hair. I could feel the layer of dried sweat on my body. I needed to get out of here, needed to go home and take a shower. I needed to find my clothes. I ducked into the bedroom, finding my jeans on the floor, my panties on the dresser, my Academic Decathlon t-shirt over a chair.

I was graduating tonight with top honors. My sister was proud of me for achieving what she never finished. So proud that she had insisted I come to this house with her last night. It'll just be a few of my friends hanging out. No big deal. It'll be fun. Come on, you deserve a night of fun. At the house she offered me my first beer. Just try it. You're too tense. This will loosen you up. I turned to the bed, looking down on the naked guy who was thankfully still sleeping. I had never wanted to be loose.

The black top sheet hung from the foot of the bed. Focusing on the posters on the wall, I slowly lifted the thin sheet over the guy's legs. I glanced down at the sleeping face for any sign of waking before draping the black sheet over his lower back, letting the sheet float down to cover up the guy's naked body.

I recognized him. His name was Derek, and he was a couple of years older than me. I remembered his name because I had blushed every time Derek caught me gawking at him last night. I didn't know him. I vaguely remembered my sister pushing me towards him. Derek smiling shyly while my

sister introduced us. The awkward silence when my sister left us alone. The relief of seeing my sister coming back, offering both of us another beer.

I turned away from the bed and went to the door, letting my hand rest on the handle. I just stood there, listening to the music, the happy voices laughing on the other side of the door. I couldn't believe I slept with Derek, even if he was cute. I couldn't believe that my sister would let me get plastered and come into this bedroom.

A cell phone cried out from the mess of clothes on the floor, making me jump and spin around. For about half a second, I entertained the idea of finding the cell phone and shutting it off before Derek woke up. Too late. He let out a soft groan, pushing his face into the pillow and moving to shrug himself off of the bed.

"Don't move." My mind shouted, but my voice was insanely calm. Derek squinted up at me. "I'll get it for you." My eyes flipped to the thin black sheet covering Derek's rear end. I dropped to the floor and found the phone chirping from a pair of blue jeans. I held the cell phone out to him.

Derek stared at me for a long moment before taking the phone.

"We had sex, right?"

"Pretty sure."

"So why you flipping out over seeing me naked?"

I let my mouth sag open and stared at the floor.

Derek shut off the alarm on his phone.

"You wanna give me my pants?"

I held out the blue jeans for him.

"Dani, right?" Derek paused long enough for me to nod. "Ain't you Candi's little sister?"

I nodded again, watching him roll to a sitting position on the bed, one hand keeping the sheet at his waist.

"You ain't nothing like her." Derek grinned, taking the blue jeans from me. "Candi'd be climbing all over me right now." I squeezed my eyes shut, turning my head away. God, I did not want to hear this. I didn't even want to be here. "I've never been with Candi. Buds of mine have. They told me." Derek's voice trailed off.

"I just... could you put your pants on so I can open the door."

"You wanting to leave?"

"Be nice."

"I thought you rode here with Candi."

"Yeah, she's my ride."

Derek motioned towards the door and the voices playing with the music in

The mirror showed me in all my glory.

(continued on page 54)

the next room. "Don't sound like she's ready to leave."

As much as I didn't want to admit it, he was right. Candi sounded like she was having so much fun in the next room that I'd probably have to beg and plead to get my sister to take me home. Not too enthusiastic about making a scene in front of my sister's friends, I slumped down on the floor, sitting on a worn out sneaker.

"I'm graduating tonight. I need to get home, take a shower, get ready. My parents bought me a dress for the ceremony. Cost almost two hundred dollars. Don't know why, not like anyone's going to see it under my robe. It's nice, though. Purple. Satin." Why was I telling him this? "I'm graduating and going to UT in the fall. Got a full nerd scholarship. That makes my parents happy, seeing as how we'd have had to take out some major loans to afford it. My parents are probably worried about me by now." Nope. No idea why I was baring my soul to Derek. I guess he's already seen me naked, so why not? "I'm not really one for staying out all night. I'm not really one for going out at all, not even to the movies. My sister talked me into coming--"

"You were a ..." Derek cut me off, stopped in the middle of pulling his jeans on underneath the sheet. He looked from his lap to me.

"Was." I breathed, wrapping my arms around my stomach. Oh, God, I did not want to think about this right now.

"Ah, man." Derek shimmied the rest of the way into his jeans and flung his legs over the side of the bed. "If you woulda said something." I stared at the floor, hugging my stomach tighter. When Derek spoke again, his voice was so low that I almost didn't hear him. "Sorry."

We listened to the voices in the next room, laughing over the music. How do people live like this? Get drunk, sleep with random partners, and then go back to joking the next day? I didn't think I'd ever smile again. Maybe in a couple of weeks, if my period hit on schedule, I might let out a grin. After that, who knows? I mean, one night. One night and I'm not me anymore. I'm not the good girl that always did her chores, had dinner every night with the folks, and stayed up until three o'clock in the morning over studying for a dinky quiz. That wasn't me anymore. I felt like my sister. I tightened my jaw, forcing back another wave of nausea.

"I don't mean to rush things," Derek stood up and started picking his

way through the room. "But I got an appointment." He leaned over to grab a black T-shirt from the floor and gave it a little shake before shrugging it on. "I gotta go get cleaned up, drive across town. My thing's in, like, an hour. Ain't no way I can be late." He picked up a pair of black combat boots and stared down at me. "You, um, you want me to give you a ride home?"

"You're leaving to get cleaned up?"

Derek nodded.

"This isn't your room?"

"You think I live here?" Derek grinned, casting a quick glance at the black light posters on the walls and the hidden floor. "Naw, I think this is Jacob's room. He's kinda friendly with the pot." The grin fell from Derek's face. "We didn't, like, smoke or shoot up anything, did we?"

"I hope not."

"Be cool if you knew for sure."

I shrugged.

"So you want me to take you home, or what?"

"If you don't mind."

One night and I'm not me anymore.

Derek slid into his boots, leaving the laces untied, and opened the window.

"What are you doing?" I shoved myself to my feet, flapping my arms out a little for balance. "The door's right there."

Derek popped the screen out of the window and tossed one leg outside.

"Yeah, but you really want to see all those people right now?"

Derek dipped through the window and then turned back, holding a hand out to me. A rowdy burst of laughter chased the music under the door. I walked towards the window and Derek's waiting hand.

I stopped in front of the window. "What is your appointment?"

"Huh?"

"Where do have to be at in an hour?"

"Meeting with my parole officer."

I put my hand in Derek's hand and let him guide me through the window.

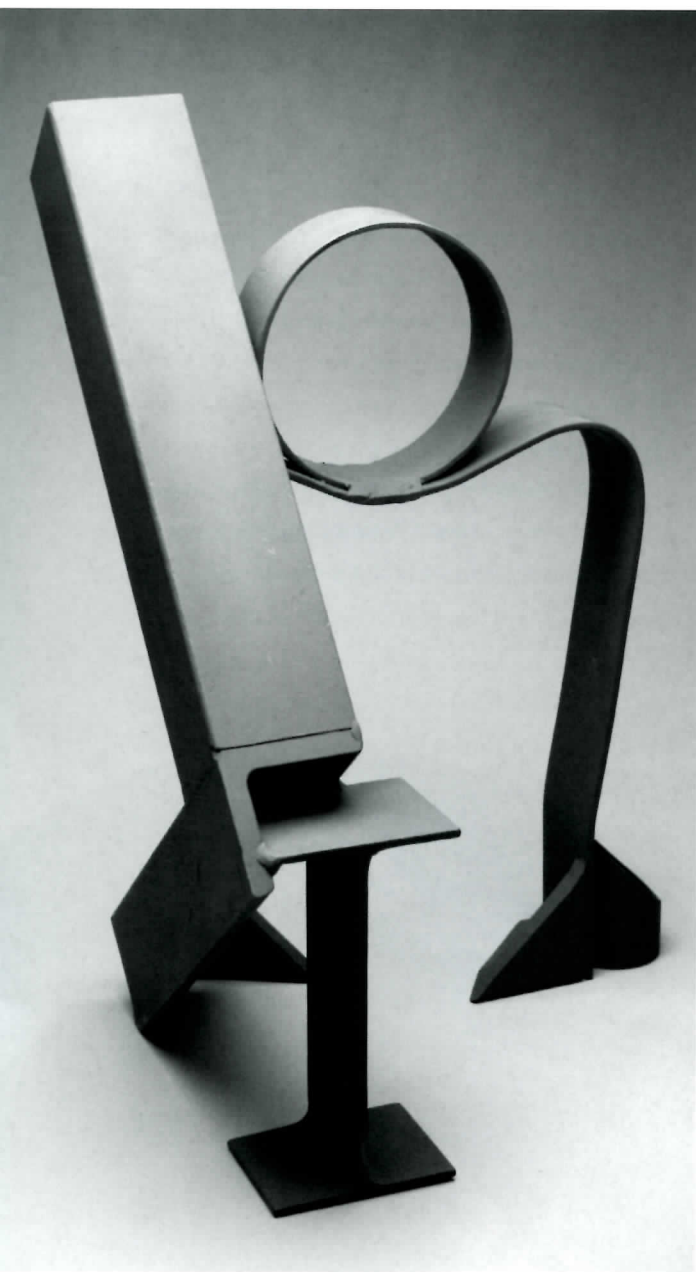
Or, The Last Shirt Doesn't Have Any Pockets

JOHN TREIBER

Standing on an incline, overlooking a single railroad track, one can see two trains approaching from opposite directions. The train coming from the right is long and overcrowded with folks who are kept away from the table of plenty- the poor and destitute, the poorly educated and the old- the flotsam of society. The cars they travel in are old and worn and barely hold up the load; they are abominable and smelly. The equipment is past what it was designed for back in the better days of yore.

From the opposite direction, the approaching train, features luxury coaches and the latest technologies. The interior is pleasingly bright, the aisles are wide, the seats are plush and other amenities abound, including opulent dining coaches with the latest in silver and crystal. These coaches are sparsely occupied- no waiting here. There are three waiters per occupant, to serve a commissary car whatever fancies one's pallet, including the rarest and most expensive wines and spirits. These diners gorge themselves far beyond what is reasonable, with the finest of food and drink; all of this, of course, is tax deductible. The conversation here, always centers on money, power, and sex- no mention about the less fortunate here; these people feel secure; they don't carry any guns, for they hire armies to protect themselves from the yokels.

Watching these two trains approaching each other, one can only wonder; will there be a train wreck of monstrous proportion or will one of them have enough sense to reverse course, while there is still time? The less fortunate argue vociferously among themselves, about what is coming down the track in front of them and conclude, they have nothing to lose. The wealthy, on the opposite train, used to getting their way by force of money, ego, bribery and other less than ethical means, can't face up to the imminent disaster and get it through their head, that if nobody gives in, what they worked for all their lives, including all the ill-gotten gains, might have been in vain; the last shirt doesn't have any pockets!



Sculpture MORRIS YANGER

Music as a Kid

LISA HUANG

I always thought as a kid
The best sex always comes alongside music
Comes alongside the boy's flamboyant sound
Comes alongside the girl's tender voice

I always thought as a kid
The best of nature always comes around music
Comes around from the sky, the piano's melody
Comes around from the earth, the drumming rhythm

I always thought as a kid
Pureness always comes inside music
Comes inside the heart, the cello's harmony
Comes inside the mind, the violin's timbre

I always thought as a kid
The best music always comes with me
Comes with me in joyfulness
Comes with me in sadness

I always thought as a kid
The best music always turns into a dream
From where the natural and pure music
Was brought into the world where I belong

KAREN CARLIN

I am who I am.

I am my mother's daughter,

Anyone can guess.

The face she has is mine as well.

Except for the gray-blue eyes,

She gave me the mysterious brown,

As if she knew the troubles they would hide.

I am who I am.

At times it can be more a curse than a gift.

Punishment should not have come because
of a face I did not choose.

I am who I am.

She had the courage to escape the abuse.

She never knew I became her substitute,

All because the face I have is hers as well.

I am who I am.

With a mind much unbalanced,

Due to the things I saw, heard, and felt.

My emotions, always very sensitive.

Sadness seems to be a part of my soul.

I am who I am.

I seem to need so very much,

But I never dared to ask.

There are words I need to hear.

Words I never asked for.

I am who I am.

I am my mother's daughter.

Who she is, is much of who I am.

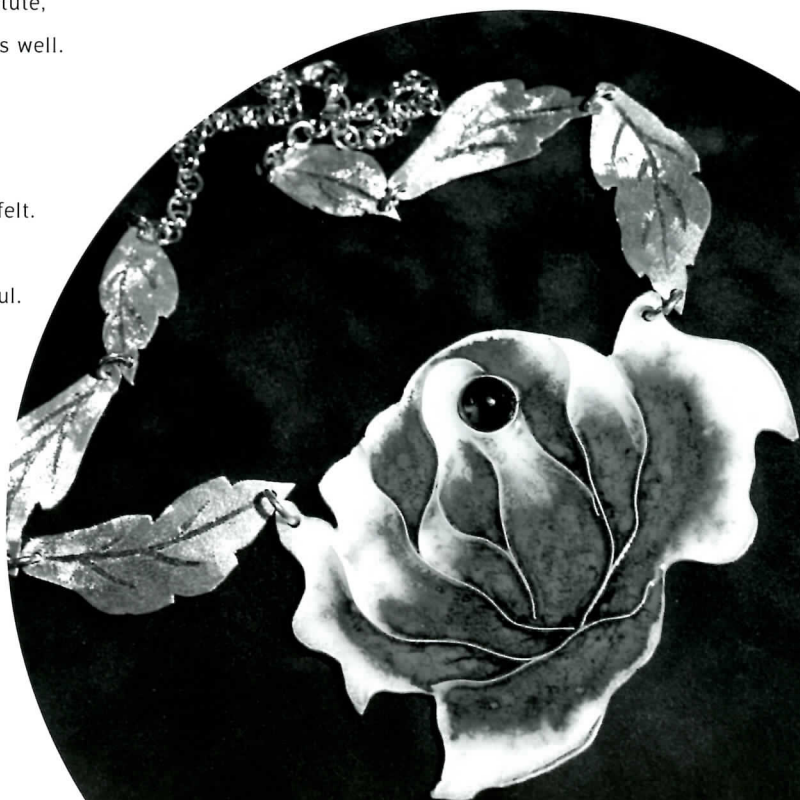
To make her proud is all I want,

It is all I need to hear.

I am who I am.

Jewelry Design

JOAN DURRKE



Editor's Note: With permission, I have chosen to include an actual TAKS test from a Collin County fourth grader. If hers is any indication, I daresay our educational system is alive and well and the future is bright and shiny. It is copied exactly as written. By the way, fourth grade translates to 10 years old.

TAKS Written Composition Grade 4

BLAINE CATHEY

Summer is my favorite time of the year. Unlike most children, my favorite place to go is to the community swimming pool. Other kids think Six Flags is much more exciting. Though they find other events more entertaining, swimming is what I say is the best. Actually, no other time I've gone swimming matches up to the time Pate (my sister), Majie (my soccer ball), and I went swimming.

I could already feel the burning sensation of sweat drip down my back and the sunscreen sting just from stepping out of the front door. Knowing that this trip was going to be extremely fun, I flung the toy sack over my shoulder, picked up Majie and took off to the pool with Pate following. Behind me I hear click-clock, click-clock of Pate's flip-flops beating against the concrete. Half way into the walk my shoulder began getting numb from the sack. As soon as I got past the gate, I quickly set my things down on a sun tan chair and leaped into the blue, cold, refreshing water. The water cooled me off as I dunked Majie into the pool and relaxed.

Suddenly I spotted my sister struggling with her floaties and ran over to help her. When I slipped on the last floatie she squirmed out of my arms, shouted, "Cannonball," and cannonballed into the chilly pool. Pate and I played games like torpedo toss and number tiles. I had all of my hidden tiles in the deep end because I can swim. Since Pate doesn't know how to swim all of her number tiles were in the shallow end where she is able to reach them. Seeing the

beautiful rainbow torpedo color's twirl in the water made me dizzy. After we got bored with playing torpedo toss and number tiles, I suggested that we throw Majie back and forth. We were the only ones at the community center so we swam around it in big circles trying to form a whirl pool but it was too big, we didn't have enough people, and there wasn't enough circulation.

I noticed the time on my waterproof watch, and it was time to go home. I told Pate that we were about to leave and we could only fit in one more game before we left. So I let Pate play whatever she wanted to while I played a quick game of basketball with Majie. It seemed like Pate had fun playing water hopscotch. She played in the seven inch shallow part of the pool using number tiles as the boxes. When it was exactly time to leave I packed up the toys and helped Pate take her floaties off. We got to the gate and were ready to leave with our heads hung low not wanting to go home. I held Majie in one arm with the toy sack in the other and took off to the house with Pate in front. This time instead of hearing click-clock, click-clock, I heard splish-splash, swoosh-swish, of the soaked flip-flops slapping against the concrete and no longer did the sunscreen sting and now sweat dripped down my back.

Now every time I go swim, I bring Pate and Majie along with me. I think it's just funner with some company to swim with. The community pool is always going to be my favorite place to swim and I just can't wait till tomorrow another day of swimming.

Thought Process

TALMEEZ F. BURNEY

My heart is still silent like the sky.
Something is sleeping in the clouds.
I'm still waiting for the whip of lightning.

My Heart

TALMEEZ F. BURNEY

A wallet
which has never been stolen
but
ransacked many times.



Alessandra ANDREA ALCORAZZA



FORCES


COLLIN
COLLINS

07PB-223